

## **Homelessness**

Essential question: “What leads to homelessness and what can we do about it?”

**School:** Grover Washington Jr. Middle School, Philadelphia, PA

**Year of project:** 2003-2004

Can eighth grade students find jobs for formerly homeless men? They can try. That’s what students in Jennifer Parker’s special education class did for the culmination of their yearlong project on homelessness.

The students were inspired after meeting two formerly homeless men from the nonprofit organization Ready Willing & Able. RWA provides support to men who are trying to end their addiction to drugs and find fulltime housing and employment. During their visit to the classroom the two trainees told shared their stories with the students about how they had become homeless. No details were spared.

After meeting the two men, the class took a field trip to RWA’s downtown facility, where they shared lunch with other trainees. To get to know the men better and also participate in hands-on service, the students spent an afternoon working alongside RWA trainees sorting food at the Greater Philadelphia Food Bank – an opportunity that not only provided momentum for the project but also deepened the relationship with the men.

The students learned that finding gainful employment is one of RWA graduates’ greatest challenges. To support the men in this effort, the students decided to approach retail businesses on their behalf. They brainstormed ideas, created scripts and then rehearsed their presentations; they learned the importance of making their case with conviction and confidence and conviction. Then they hit the road, visiting stores in walking distance from their school and speaking with the managers about this special pool of job candidates..

Said RWA graduate James Ballow: “To have these kids campaigning for men who are trying to turn their lives around – this really touches my heart. They are giving us all hope.”

The students were impacted, as well:

“They [the RWA trainees] messed up, getting involved with drugs, but they’re still human. They’re just like us. When we mess up, we want someone to forgive us.”

-- *Deval Miller, 8<sup>th</sup> grade student*

“All people should get a second chance to make up for their mistakes.”

-- *Isaiah Harrison, 8<sup>th</sup> grade student*